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Research Report

Anti democratic attitudes: The influence of work, digital transformation and climate change

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POLICY BRIEF

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ANTI-DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES

The influence of work, digital transformation and climate change

Andreas Hövermann, Bettina Kohlrausch and Dorothea Voss

When anti-democratic attitudes find great popular acclaim, it is time to sit up and take notice: people are turning away from the democratic system and no longer put their trust in the political and social rules and instances that organise and structure societal coexistence. As a result, social cohesion and the acceptance of democratic decisions come under increasing pressure. And yet a stable democracy is particularly important at a time in which the "three Ds" – decarbonisation, digitalisation, demography – are challenging German society and triggering change.

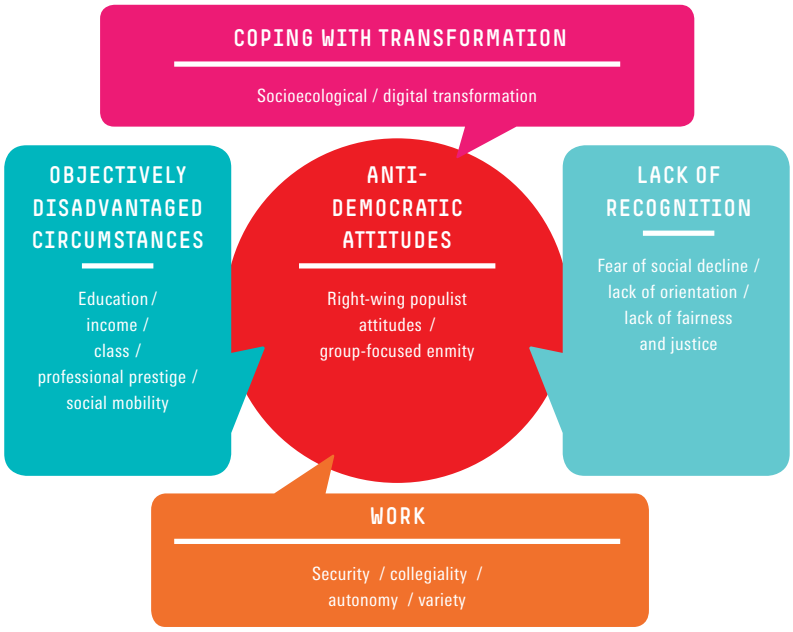
So how widespread are anti-democratic attitudes and how is the connection between social circumstances and democratic integration during times of announced and actual change processes? How do perceptions and experience resulting from gainful employment influence anti-democratic attitudes?

We have taken the evaluations of a representative public opinion poll to show that people in objectively precarious circumstances are denied access to opportunities for participation and for shaping their own lives also in view of external changes. Subjective perception also plays a role in anti-democratic attitudes: the lack of recognition is experienced as devaluation of one's own social and professional status.

Anti-democratic attitudes are also closely linked to the fear and experience of getting left behind by social change processes such as digital or socioecological transformation.

Figure 1

Schematic representation of issues closely linked with anti-democratic attitudes



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The findings are based on data collected by the polling institute IPSOS between November 4th, 2020 and January 7th, 2021 as a representative telephone survey. The survey yielded a random sample of 4,116 respondents. Gainfully employed workers, who were the focus of the study, were surveyed with disproportionate frequency (N = 2,956). Weighting factors permit a representative representation of both the overall population and the working population of Germany. This Policy Brief features primarily empirical findings that have also been proven as statistically significant in more complex multivariate analyses. The study is part of the "Social Circumstances and Democratic Integration" research project of the Hans Böckler Foundation.

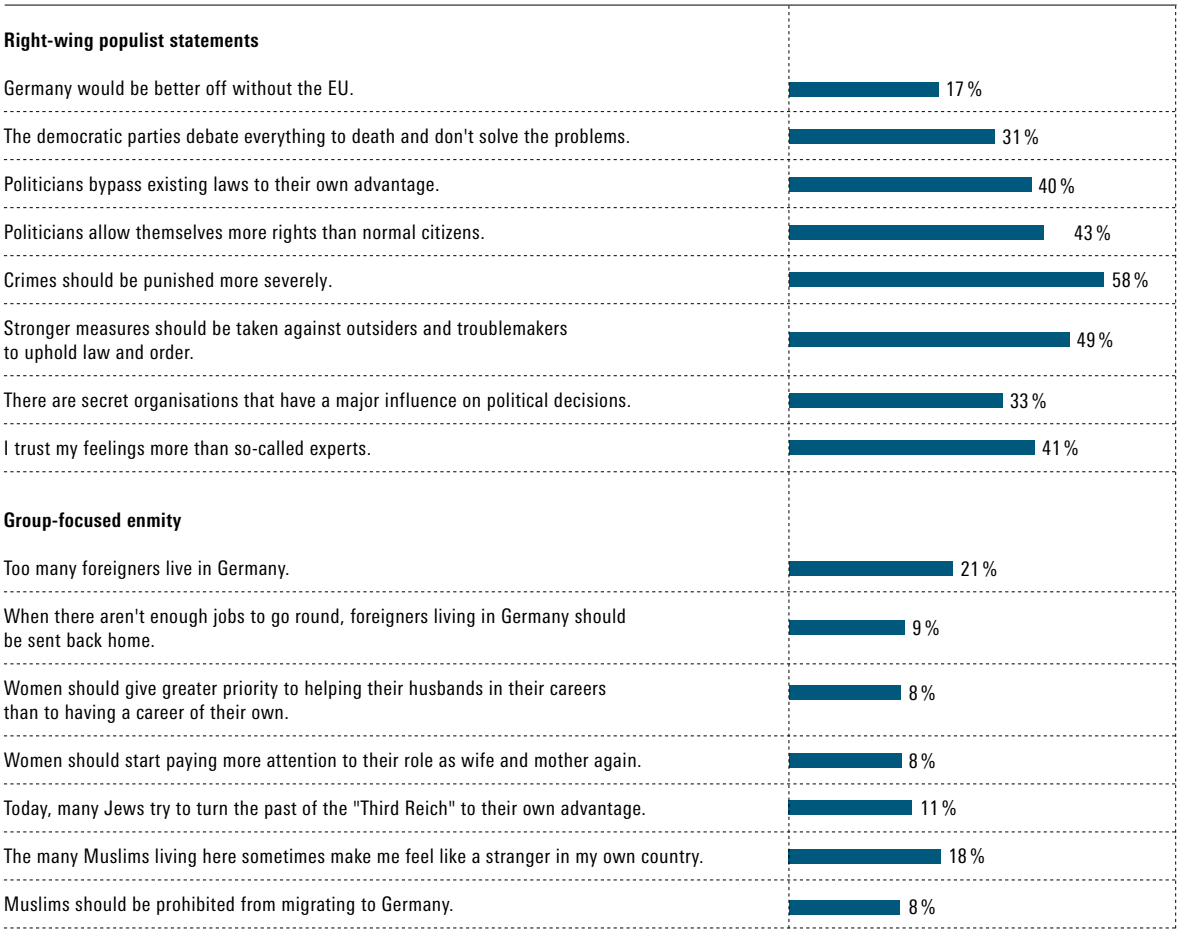
1 ANTI-DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES

For decades, survey studies have shown that right-wing populist and attitudes of group-focused enmity are widespread in Germany's population and in some cases extend deep into the centre of society (e.g. Heitmeyer 2002, Decker / Brähler 2006, Zick / Küpper 2021). This is also confirmed by our representative survey. For example, 43 percent of the overall population "rather agree" or "fully agree" that "politicians allow themselves more rights than normal citizens". Similarly, around one third agrees with the conspiratorial statement that there are "secret organisations that have a major influence on political decisions". Although there was slightly less acceptance for the mostly strongly worded statements on group-focused enmity, here too around 20 percent stated that "too many foreigners live in Germany" and a similar number said "the many Muslims living here sometimes make me feel like a stranger in my own country" (Figure 2).

We referred to these and other statements that have become established for measuring anti-democratic attitudes (cf. Zick / Küpper 2021). We used eight statements from the index "right-wing populist attitudes" and seven statements from the index "group-focused enmity", pooled collectively as "anti-democratic attitudes" (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Approval ratings for right-wing populist attitudes and statements on group-focused enmity



Remarks: all respondents N = 4,116; share of "agree entirely" and "rather" on a scale of 1 to 5

The scale of anti-democratic attitudes was divided into three groups in the interests of easier interpretation: respondents who gave an average rating of at least 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5 were allocated to the "high extent" group, as they showed a greater tendency on average to accept the statements rather than rejecting them. Similarly, respondents who gave a rating of less than 2.5 were allocated to the "low extent" group, as they tended to reject the statements on average. Respondents with average agreement between 2.5 and 3.5 were allocated to the "medium extent" group.

It is important to emphasise that stipulating the mentioned limit values is a question of definition. For example, the limit for "high extent" could also have been set to 4, resulting in lower shares. It is therefore not very expedient to make the statement "10 percent of the workforce show a high extent of anti-democratic attitudes". It makes far more sense to interpret the ratings in relation to each other, in other words, to look at the differences between the groups. For example: 10 percent of the workforce share a high extent of anti-democratic attitudes, compared to 20 percent of the non-working population.

2 GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK

Gainful employment acts as protection against anti-democratic attitudes. People in gainful employment are less likely to agree with anti-democratic attitudes than the non-working population (Figure 3). More complex multivariate analyses show that the difference between the gainfully employed and the non-working population still persists when giving consideration to the low level of formal education more frequently found among the non-working population.

Given our special interest in the relationship between experience in the work context and anti-democratic attitudes, we will only consider the gainfully employed in the following. Here we find clear influencing factors: gainfully employed people who describe their **job as precarious** agree with anti-democratic attitudes more frequently than respondents who describe their job as being secure. Similarly, above-average agreement was expressed by respondents whose households had to accept **a loss in income** during the coronavirus pandemic (Figure 4).

Figure 3

Extent of anti-democratic attitudes among the gainfully employed and non-working population

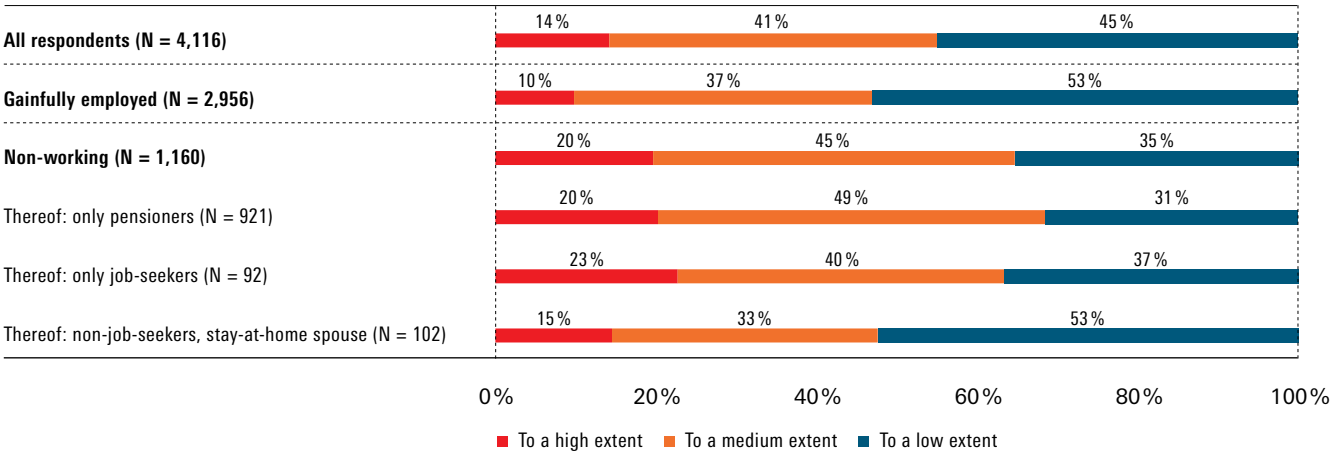
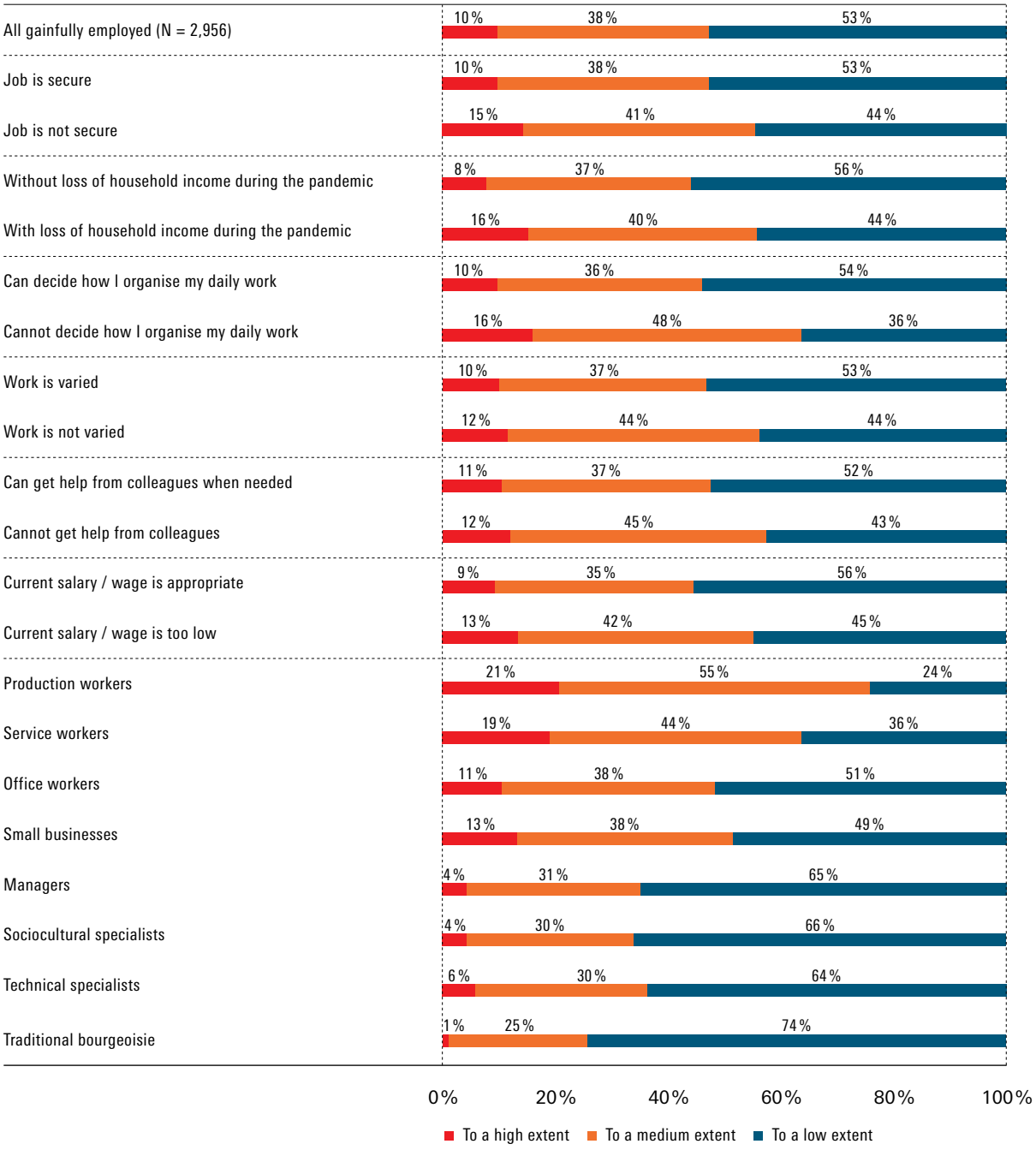


Figure 4

Extent of anti-democratic attitudes according to working conditions



Remarks: Only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

There are also strong correlations for the direct work context: a **high level of autonomy** offers protection from anti-democratic attitudes; by contrast, experiencing a **loss of control** and meagre opportunities and options to make a contribution are a breeding ground for democratic disintegration. Those who cannot decide how to **organise their daily work**, whose work is not **varied**, who cannot expect **support from colleagues** and who feel their **wage is too low** agree with anti-democratic attitudes with above-average frequency. In this context, **co-determination** makes a difference for the working conditions: workers whose interests are represented in the company or whose working conditions are regulated by a collective bargaining agreement report of better working conditions than those for whom this does not apply.

Our analyses also clearly showed that people whose job puts them in a higher working class (cf. Oesch 2006) are less prone to anti-democratic attitudes.

Integration in the labour market therefore provides protection from anti-democratic attitudes. Furthermore, the more secure this integration, the more seldom do people agree with anti-democratic attitudes.

3 OBJECTIVE SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Education and income are important indicators for social status and participation in society. A high level of education and adequate income create opportunity structures that give people scope for action and facilitate democratic integration. The significance of the objective social circumstances is reflected in our evaluations: respondents with a **higher income** and a **higher level of formal education** show a clearly less frequent tendency to anti-democratic attitudes (Figure 5).

One's own social status is defined above all in relation to others. This applies among others for the standing of one's own job. It transpires that there is a particularly strong correlation between the occupational prestige assigned by society to certain jobs and anti-democratic attitudes. **Occupational prestige** is measured according to the Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale (SIOPS) and is based on how the population rates the social standing of various jobs, from "12" for shoe shiners to "78" for doctors (Ganzeboom / Treiman 1996).

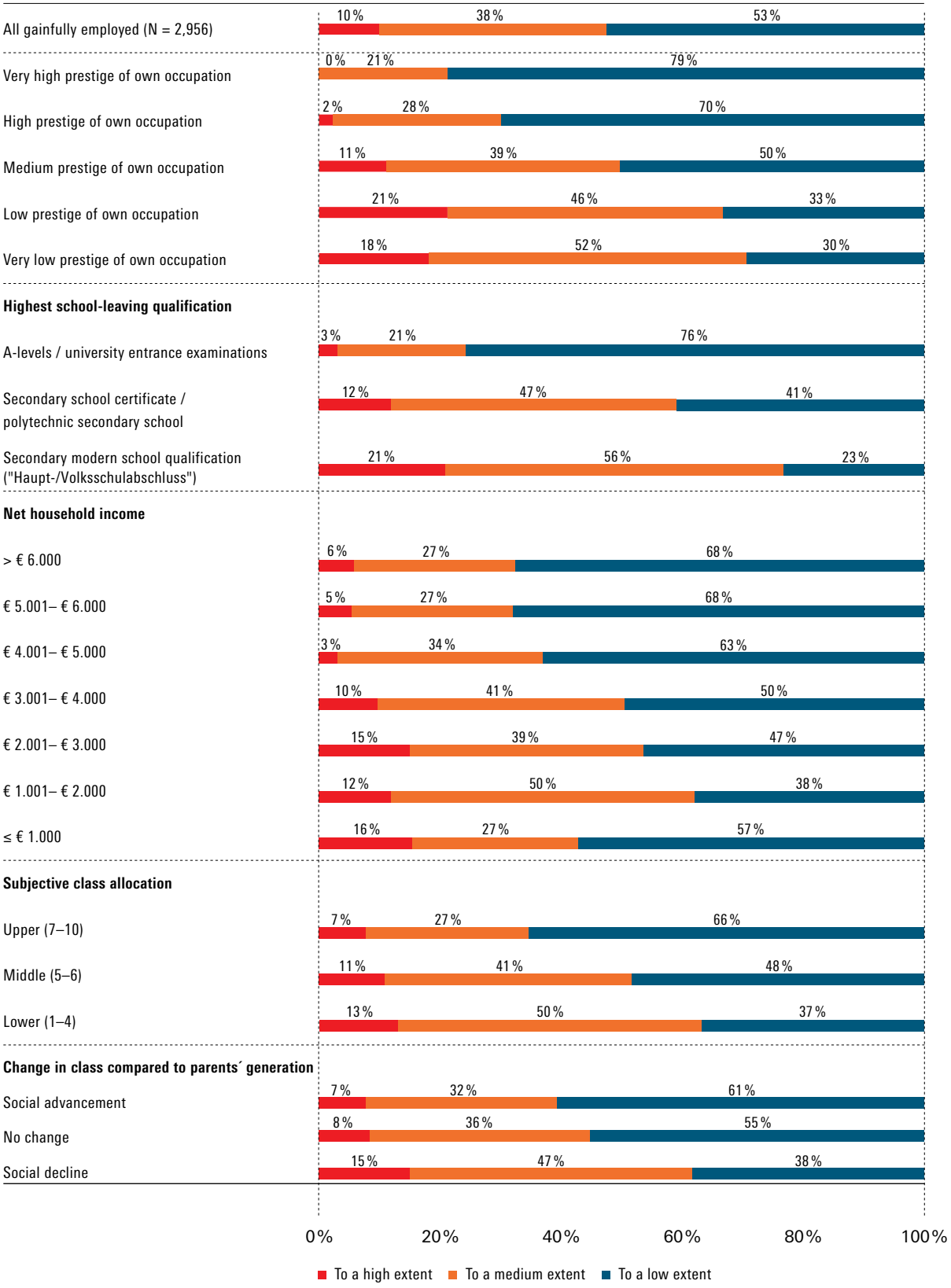
Figure 5 shows that low occupational prestige and the related low occupational recognition have a great influence on anti-democratic attitudes. This also applies above all to right-wing populist attitudes regardless of other important influencing factors such as level of education and income, giving this explanatory factor high empirical weight.

Class affiliation also has an influence on anti-democratic attitudes: those who put themselves in a low **class** show anti-democratic attitudes to a higher extent than respondents from higher classes. The dimension of social mobility also has a significant effect: experiencing **social decline** and the associated loss of status, measured by the view that someone's own parents belonged to a higher class than they themselves do, proves to be closely linked to anti-democratic attitudes.

There is therefore altogether a clear correlation between objectively measurable social circumstances and the spread of anti-democratic attitudes: poor availability of education-related material resources, low occupational prestige, low class affiliation and downward social mobility are associated with above-average assent to anti-democratic attitudes.

Figure 5

Extent of anti-democratic attitudes according to life circumstances



Remarks: Only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

4 LACKING RECOGNITION

Sociopsychological research has ascertained that social disintegration resulting, for example, from (too) low income is closely associated with recognition and devaluation experience. This also includes "recognition threats", i.e. worrying about devaluation in future (Heitmeyer 2018). The subjective level of perceived recognition and devaluation thus becomes a relevant dimension of democratic integration.

Our evaluations show strong correlations covering all aspects of **recognition** (Figure 6). Those who fear they will not be able to uphold their standard of living in the long term agree with anti-democratic statements with above-average frequency. This expresses the subjective view that the social and material status is not secured in the long term, with potential devaluation of the biographically acquired social position.

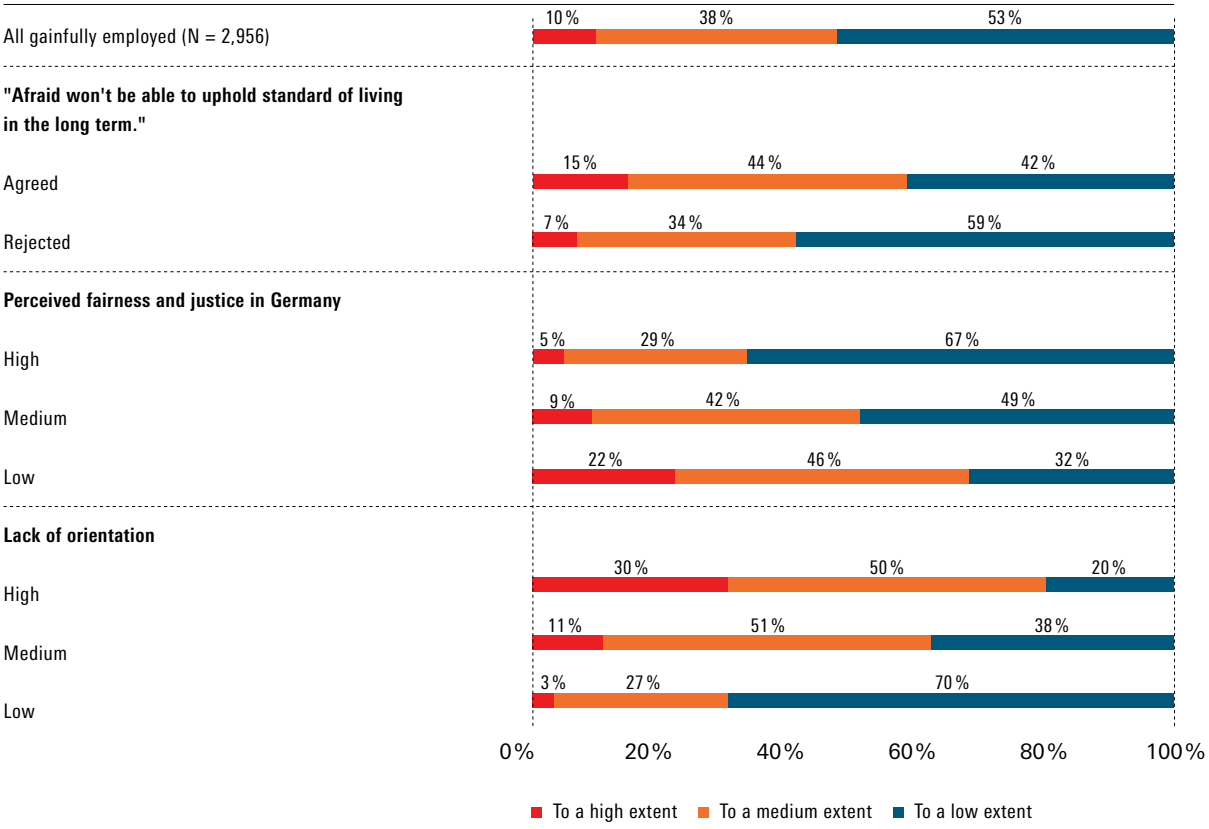
Infobox 1

Theoretical link

Our presentation of the empirical findings is based on the "Theorie Sozialer Desintegration" (theory of social disintegration) by Anhut and Heitmeyer (2005). We thereby adopt the distinction between the objective level where integration is influenced by opportunity structures and offers, and the subjective level where forms of recognition influence integration or disintegration. Systematic adherence to the distinction made there between positional, moral and emotional recognition is not implemented here for reasons of complexity. Some recognition dimensions were measured according to established concepts of the theory of social disintegration.

Figure 6

Extent of anti-democratic attitudes according to recognition



Remarks: Only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

Such **fear of decline** must thus be interpreted as a recognition threat, which previous studies have already shown to be closely linked to anti-democratic attitudes (Hilmer et al. 2017, Kohlrausch / Höcker 2020). Incidentally, this correlation exists regardless of education, income and occupational position, i.e. subjective recognition threats are not automatically associated with the specific experience of material loss of prosperity.

Similarly, the respondents' view of society is very relevant. Their perception of justice plays an important role. Two thirds of those who say that Germany only has a low level of **fairness and justice** agree to a high or medium extent with anti-democratic attitudes. The right-wing populist agenda is apparently capable of intercepting this: in their opinion, the lack of fairness and justice is caused by the political system and its actors, thus questioning its legitimacy.

Evaluations of perceived **lack of orientation** – i.e. the helpless feeling of lagging behind social processes as a citizen and no longer being able to "keep up" – also reveals strong correlations to anti-democratic attitudes: 80 percent of the respondents indicating a high lack of orientation agreed to a high or medium extent with anti-democratic attitudes.

Particularly in the context of the transformation topics "digital transformation" and "socioecological transformation", it makes sense to presume that the dynamic of social disintegration grows with increasing lack of orientation. In other words: changes are potential recognition threats with regard to orientation capability and thus the subjective possibility of shaping one's own life in changed social contexts.

Infobox 2

Perceived fairness and justice in Germany is measured by the response to the following statements:

- People are fair to each other in Germany.
- Prosperity is distributed fairly in Germany.
- The welfare state does not work.
- Democracy in Germany works pretty well for the most part.

Lack of orientation is measured by the response to the following statements:

- Decisions about my life are taken somewhere out there in the world.
- I am increasingly unable to keep pace with technical changes.
- Today everything has become so disordered that you sometimes no longer know exactly where you stand.
- Things today have got so complex that you sometimes no longer know what's actually going on.

5 EXPERIENCE OF CHANGE

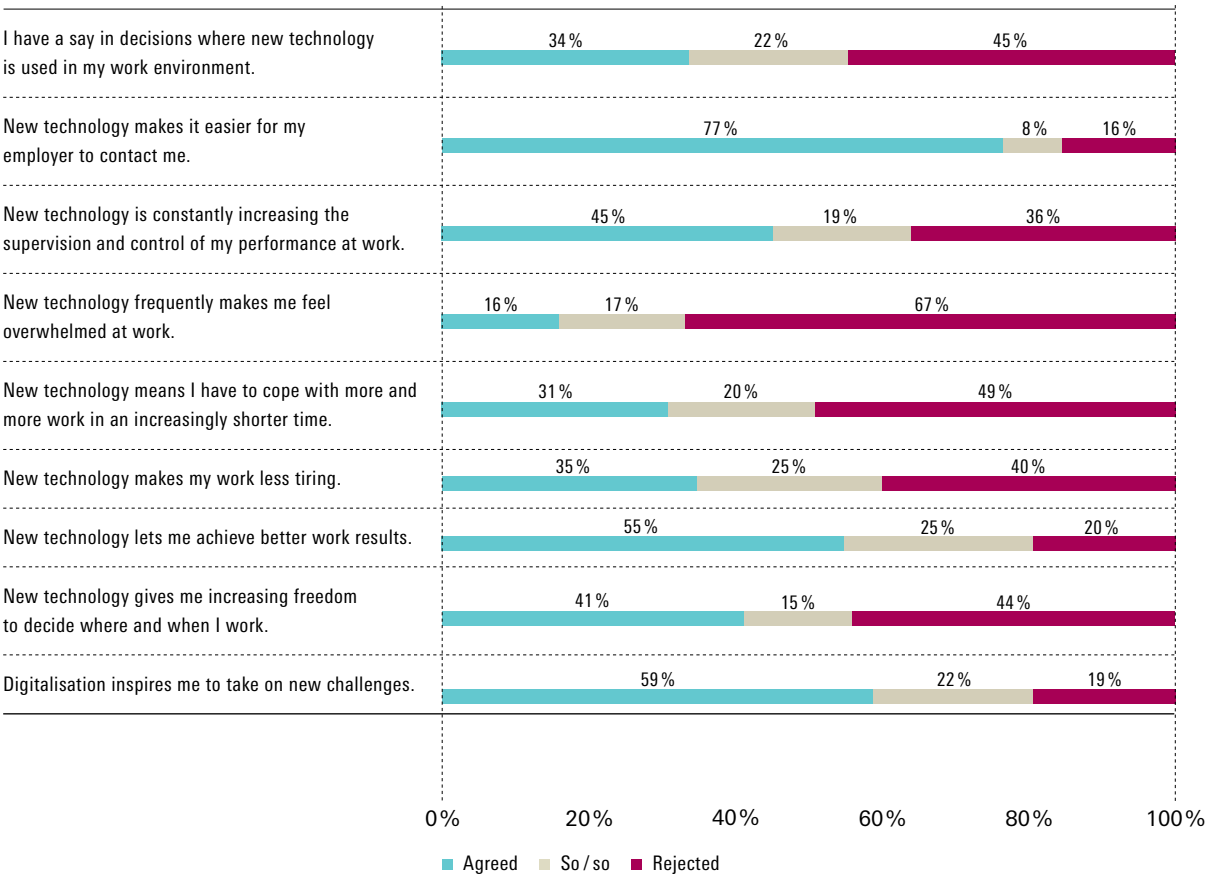
5.1 Digital transformation

Digitalisation has arrived in the world of work. Two thirds of all respondents who are gainfully employed said that "digital new technologies have been used with increasing frequency in their work over recent years". They see the digital transformation as an ambivalent development. Enhanced reachability and greater possibilities for supervision and control are offset by the opinion that digitalisation inspires people to take up new challenges and facilitates better work results. Similarly, two thirds of the respondents do not feel overwhelmed by their digital experience at work and half of the respondents do not perceive any work intensification (Figure 7).

We found patterns in the answers given by the respondents. Six groups or clusters can be distinguished. The range extends from workers with a very positive experience of digitalisation through to workers with a primarily negative experience of digitalisation (Figure 8).

Figure 7

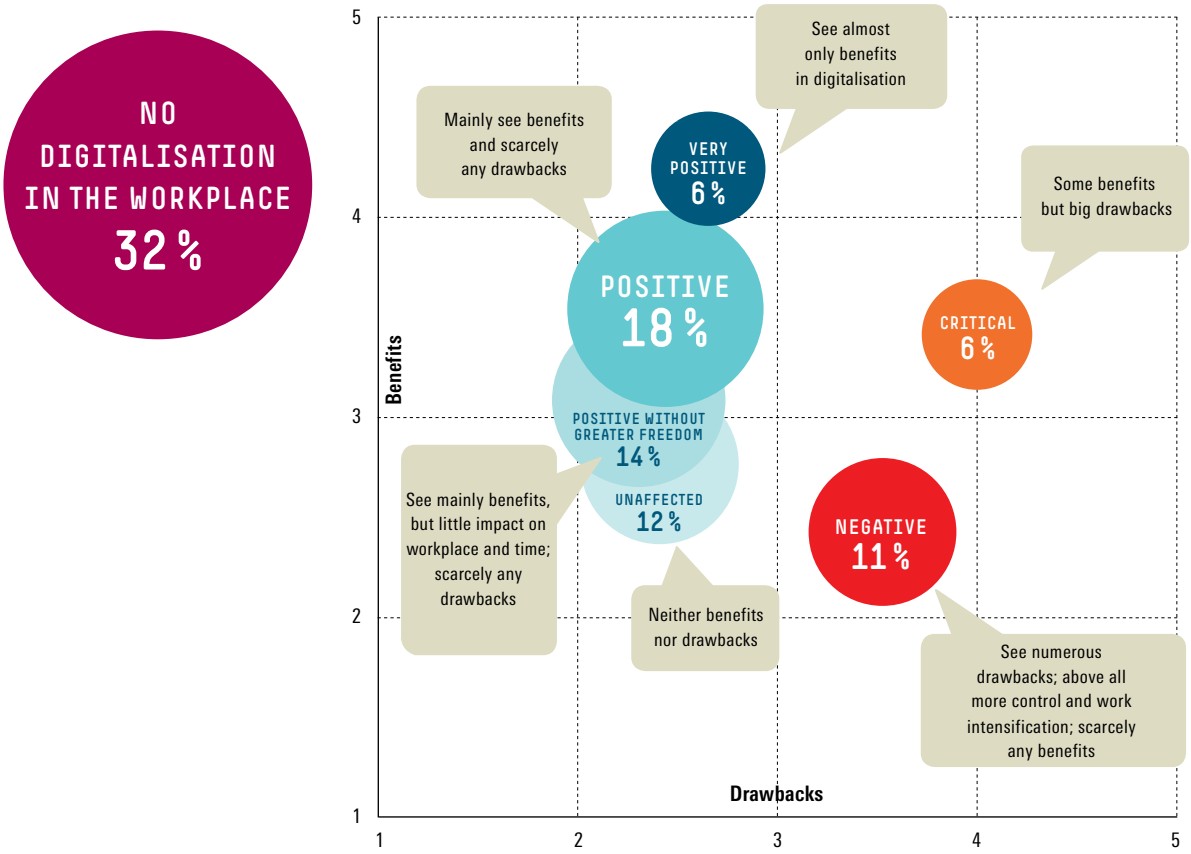
Experience with digitalisation at work



Remarks: Only gainfully employed with experience of digitalisation in the working world (N = 2,063)

Figure 8

Digitalisation experience cluster



Remarks: Only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

Infobox 3

Cluster analysis

Cluster analysis is a statistical procedure that identifies groups where the differences are as small as possible within a group and as great as possible between the groups. Respondents allocated to the same cluster therefore show similar response behaviour.

The attitude to digitalisation is not isolated from the social circumstances: gainfully employed with a negative digitalisation experience at work or who do not participate in this process have fewer material and immaterial resources available, and thus poorer prerequisites for social participation and democratic integration than those with a positive digitalisation experience (Table 1).

It is a known fact that digitalisation changes the opportunity structures in the work context, thus increasing or reducing individual power positions as well as scope for autonomy and action (Kohlrausch et al. 2019). This is also apparent here when we put digitalisation experience in correlation with the recognition aspects: gainfully employed persons with negative or no digitalisation experience also reveal lower recognition in other social areas, with a particular emphasis on the fear of decline and feeling of lack of orientation.

Even if the data do not permit unequivocal statements about causal links, our analyses would suggest that particularly gainfully employed persons who were already disadvantaged either do not have any experience of digitalisation in the workplace or tend to be negatively affected by digitalisation. Besides reinforcing the risk of material deprivation, digitalisation is also a work-related area of experience that leads to new recognition threats. The aim should therefore be to prevent digitalisation from increasing the differences between the objective and subjective perception of working and employment conditions among the gainfully employed.

5.2 Socioecological transformation

Climate change is a challenge for our society in many respects, and will also change the way we work and do business in the foreseeable future. Depending on which sector of industry is involved and which particular activity, the changes impact on gainfully employed persons to a different extent though.

Two thirds of all gainfully employed interviewed in the survey are worried or very worried about climate change. 38 percent often feel overwhelmed by climate change and its consequences, while 29 percent are confident that we will overcome climate change. Altogether there is a great deal of agreement among the respondents that higher priority should be given to overcoming climate change and initiating changes.

With regard to the social and economic consequences, opinions are divided: a majority sees climate change as a threat to social cohesion, while at the same time a majority gives full or partial assent to the statement that we are risking our entire economic prosperity if we start scrutinising everything now because of climate change (Figure 9).

We wanted to know which attitude patterns formed the basis for the approval ratings. To this end, the gainfully employed were divided into clusters again. We identified five groups showing a similar response who differed in their attitude to socioecological transformation (Figure 10).

Table 1

Cluster profiles regarding experience with digitalisation

	No digitalisation in the workplace	Negative	Critical	Unaffected	Positive without greater freedom	Positive	Very positive
Age	+	++	–	+	–	–	– –
Sex	♀♂	♀♀	♀♂	♀	♂	♂	♂
Income	– –	–	–	+	+	++	++
Education	– –	–	O	+	O	++	++
Fairness and justice	– –	– –	+	O	+	++	++
Political representation	–	– –	– –	O	+	O	++
Lack of orientation	+	+	++	O	–	– –	– –
Social mobility	– –	– –	–	O	O	+	+
Fear of decline	+	++	++	–	O	–	– –

Remarks: ++ very high level, + high level, O medium level, – low level, – – very low level

Shaded in colour: objective and subjective availability of resources; only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

Reading aid: above-average frequency of older people and women among respondents in the "negative" cluster. Their income and their level of education are slightly below average. Their perception of fairness and justice is clearly below average, their social mobility frequently negative, their possibility of political representation clearly below average, their fear of decline clearly above average and their lack of orientation slightly above average.

The priority given to climate change and socioecological transformation depends on certain social circumstances (Table 2). There are two notable, similarly sized clusters to which respondents from socially deprived circumstances are allocated with particular frequency: respondents in the clusters "low priority – against socioecological transformation" and "high priority – worried" frequently show a disadvantageous resources situation and a high level of recognition deficits, including in particular a high lack of orientation and frequent signs of negative social mobility through generational decline.

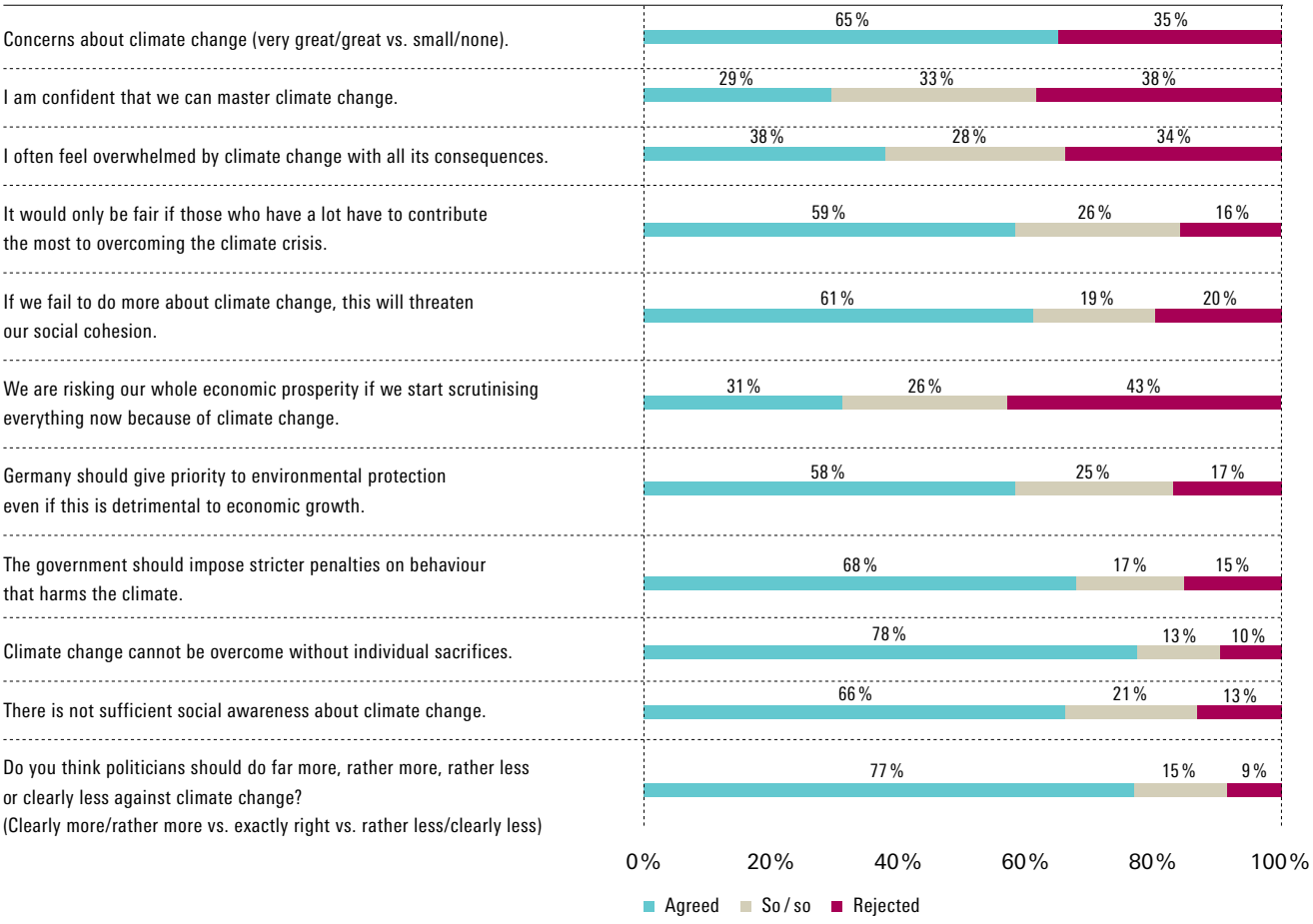
However, there is a striking sociodemographic difference between them: the "low priority – against socioecological transformation" cluster shows an above-average number of younger respondents and men, compared to an above-average number of older people and women in the "high priority – worried" cluster. Their attitude to change also differs: the latter cluster gives high priority to shaping socioecological transformation even though this makes them worried, while the former cluster disputes the need to react to the climate crisis in the first place. From the starting point of a deprived, rather disintegrated situation, these two clusters show completely different responses to socioecological transformation.

5.3 Experience of transformation and anti-democratic attitudes

The results we obtained for digital and socioecological transformation suggest that democratic integration processes are readjusted by how transformation is experienced. Gainfully employed people with recourse to fewer education and income resources and who feel less recognised tend to experience transformation processes as a greater threat to their democratic integration than other gainfully employed groups. The new integration and disintegration dynamic (Heitmeyer 2018) therefore poses the danger of exacerbating already existing polarisation between socially integrated and less integrated social groups. This refers on the one hand to the real opportunity structures and resources available to the gainfully employed and, on the other hand, to the subjective experience of a lack of recognition.

Figure 9

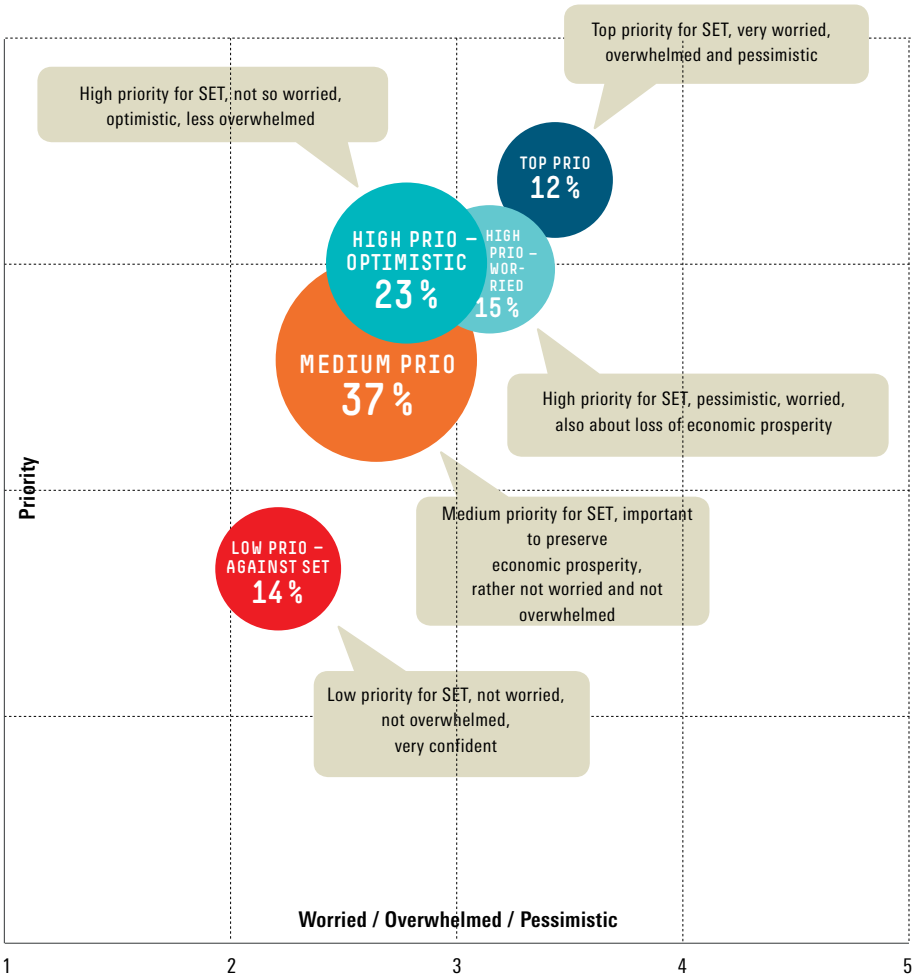
Attitudes to socioecological transformation



Remarks: Only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

Figure 10

Cluster of attitudes to socioecological transformation



Remarks: SET = socioecological transformation; deviations from 100% in the total due to rounding effects; only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

Table 2

Cluster profiles for socioecological transformation

	Low priority – against SET	Medium priority	High Priority – worried	High Priority – optimistic	Top priority
Age	–	O	++	– –	– –
Sex	♂♂	♀♂	♀♀	♀♂	♀
Income	–	+	–	+	+
Education	– –	–	–	++	++
Fairness and justice	– –	+	–	++	–
Political representation	– –	O	+	+	+
Lack of orientation	+	O	++	–	O
Social mobility	– –	O	–	+	++
Fear of decline	O	O	+	–	O

Remarks: SET = socioecological transformation ++ very high level, + high level, O medium level, – low level, – – very low level
Shaded in colour: objective and subjective availability of resources; only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)
Reading aid: above-average frequency of younger people and higher frequency of women among respondents in the "top priority" cluster. The incomes are rather above average and the education levels clearly above average. They stand out with a slightly below-average perception of fairness and justice, slightly above-average possibility of political representation and very positive social mobility. The manifestation of lack of orientation and fear of decline are average.

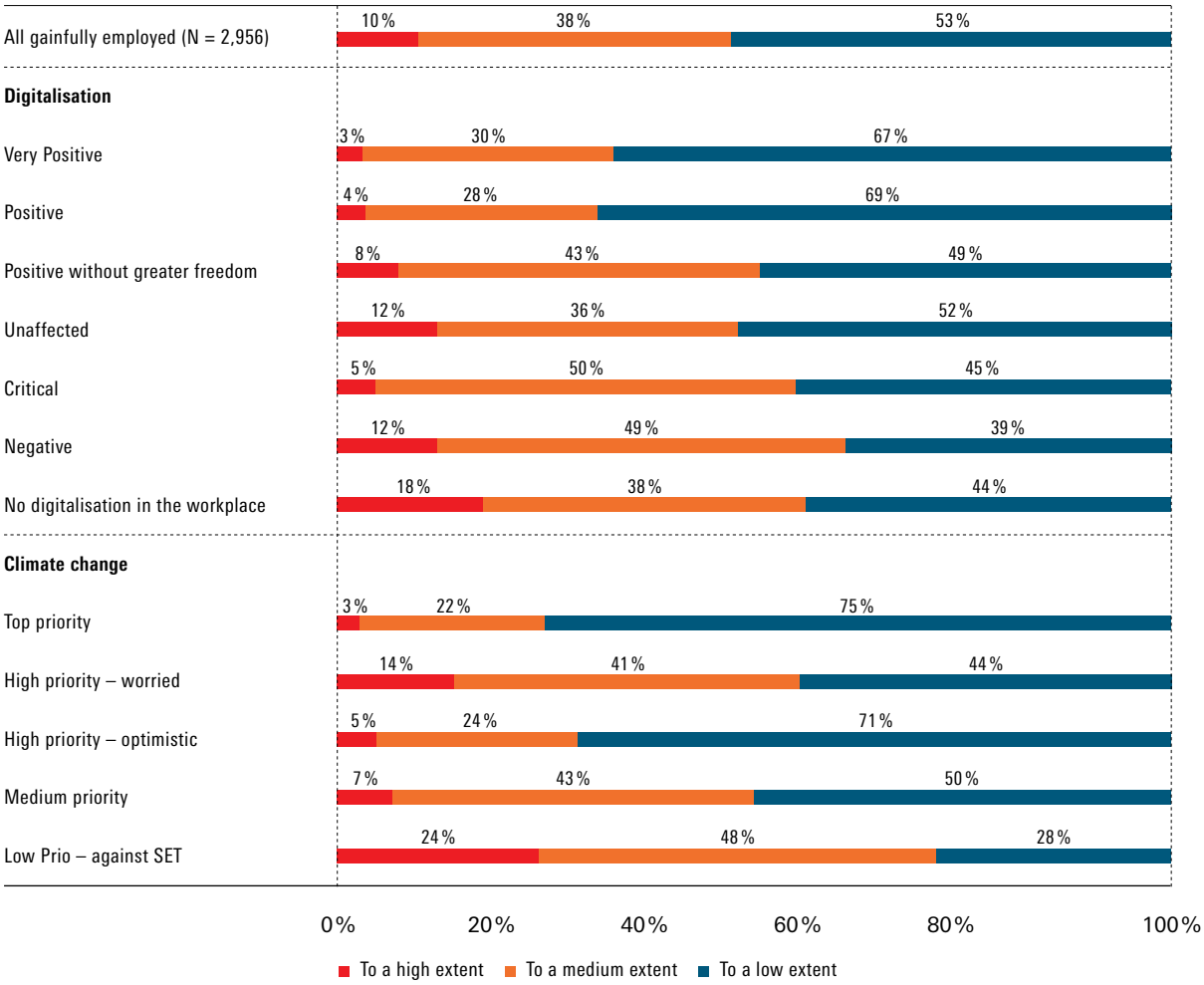
We looked specifically at how the attitude to or the way of dealing with transformation processes is linked to anti-democratic attitudes (Figure 11). In terms of digital transformation, particularly strong agreement with anti-democratic attitudes is seen among respondents where there has either been no digitalisation in the workplace or who have had negative digitalisation experiences. In their work context, they are either completely excluded from digital transformation processes or they experience digitalisation as causing deterioration in their working conditions. By contrast, it is above all those groups for whom digitalisation is associated with improved working conditions and increased autonomy that rarely show anti-democratic attitudes.

The attitudes to climate change and socioecological transformation polarise the interviewed gainfully employed with regard to anti-democratic attitudes: respondents giving very high political priority to overcoming climate change or giving high priority with an optimistic perspective show a lesser tendency to agree with anti-democratic attitudes. The more disadvantaged gainfully employed respondents in the "high priority – worried" cluster, i.e. frequently older workers and those in low income groups, show anti-democratic attitudes with a slightly above-average frequency in the context of their cluster composition that tends to approve of anti-democratic attitudes anyway.

Anti-democratic attitudes are most frequently found in the cluster consisting of an above-average number of younger, male gainfully employed who give low priority to overcoming climate change in economic and social terms: nearly three quarters of the respondents in this cluster express anti-democratic attitudes to a medium or high extent.

Figure 11

Extent of anti-democratic attitudes in the transformation clusters



Remark: SET = socioecological transformation; only gainfully employed (N = 2,956)

6 GIVING TRANSFORMATION A SOCIAL FACE

Integration in the labour market provides protection from anti-democratic attitudes. This integration is warranted on the one hand by the material security of gainfully employed people. On the other hand, work as an experiential space offers an opportunity to shape one's immediate surroundings and earn recognition for work and good performance. But this is not the case for all gainfully employed: for a certain group of the gainfully employed, the workplace is a space with little specific experience of material security, recognition, control and self-efficacy. This poses the danger of polarisation in the working world, democratic disintegration and ultimately also an increase in anti-democratic attitudes.

It is therefore a central task, particularly in times of change, to structure work in such a way that it remains or is restored to being a place for democratic integration. This refers to more than just material security: it involves the democratisation of the working environment with prospects of long-term security and the recognition of performance and values that the gainfully employed associate with their work.

Digitalisation and socioecological transformation will continue to change work, and probably at an even faster rate. It is already apparent that gainfully employed people with less access to education and income and those who feel less recognised – in other words, those who are already less well integrated in society through their work – experience these transformation processes as a greater threat than those with sufficient resources available. Transformation processes therefore harbour the danger of further polarisation of society and an increase in anti-democratic attitudes.

In the years to come, the crucial task for upholding a democratic social order consists in shaping transformation processes to be so social that people remain integrated in society. Work is and will remain the key to winning people over on the way to a changed world.

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